

Capital One Orange Bowl: Texas A&M vs North Carolina

Tuesday, December 29, 2020

Miami Gardens, Florida, USA

North Carolina Tar Heels

Hard Rock Stadium

Phil Longo

Press Conference

Q. Mack told us yesterday about what kind of transpired after Javonte informed you guys Saturday that he was opting out, wasn't going to play, and he said that you guys kind of had to do some redesign or tweaking the offense. Can you take us through that process and how much you would have to tweak not having guys like Javonte and Michael there?

PHIL LONGO: I'd say 30 carries, okay. That's what I'd tell you. Christmas morning I enjoyed a very good Christmas with four kids who wanted to go in four different directions, but we had a really good time in the morning, and thankfully relatives did a good job of supplying them with enough that they were very occupied in the afternoon. I spent a lot of Christmas afternoon calling the game based on our game plan against Texas A&M.

The 30 carries that I alluded to were the 30 of the 60 or 70 plays that you get in a ballgame, were kind of geared towards him getting the football one way or the other. I called three games with Javonte in mind, and later on on Saturday, we found out that he would not be with us.

So you have to -- you go make your adjustments. So we've got to take 30 reps and we've got to distribute them and spread them out to the other weapons that we do have. So yeah, there was some game plan adjusting going on over the weekend, and we just kind of put that to the test today in practice, and it went very well. Looking forward to having a good week of preparation leading up to Saturday.

Q. What have you seen from Josh and British in particular that you like that kind of fit into what you guys typically do anyway?

PHIL LONGO: Well, I have said, I know Mack has said, Coach Gillespie has alluded to the fact that we love the running back room as a whole. There's five guys in there, great character guys. They're all very talented -- six,



actually. Six character guys, very talented. Two of them have tremendous speed, two of them are a little bit bigger, more physical. It's a well rounded room. They all know the offense real well. They do a good job pass protecting.

What they don't have are all those reps that Michael and Javonte took for us this year. And so they have the practice reps. As I've alluded to in the past, our ones and our twos are -- our blue offense and our white offense get equal reps in practice, so they've had equal preparation on the year, so they know the system. It's just the game reps and the actual game experience against the live opponent that they don't have.

They're going to need to respond to that on Saturday.

Q. In terms of your emphasis in practice this week, just because the bowl game is past Christmas and New Year's and there's a tendency to get a little loose, how are you going to keep your guys tight and make sure they're doing the right things in practice and the emphasis on that this week?

PHIL LONGO: Well, if you ever come and spend time here, things are loose all the time. That's how Mack does it. We're relaxed. We have fun in practice. We have fun when we're preparing. I don't think this week is any different.

I think we're excited about the opportunity that some of the young guys are going to get. I'm excited to see them. I mean, you're fans of these guys. We spend every day with them, and you know that they're our future, and you look forward to watching them develop and watching them play, and we just have a scenario here where they're going to get an opportunity a little bit sooner.

You plug them in -- you're not going to change anything. We're going to do what we do. We're not going to reinvent the wheel here now. We still have 42 other guys that know the offense and are instinctive in the offense that we've been running and have been successful all year. We're going to do what we do, plug the new guys in and keep going.

Q. What was your message to some of these guys in practice this week as far as having to step up, and what's their response been in practice, specifically the

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two in the backfield with Josh and British?

PHIL LONGO: You know, truthfully, I didn't address it at all. I mean, when we have an injured guy, I don't address it with the team. You know, occasionally if Coach Brown feels like that's necessary, then he's the head coach, he'll do that. But from an offensive standpoint, if somebody is out, we plug in the next guy and we practice. And whether that be because of an opt-out or an injury or any other reason that would keep a guy out of practice, don't have the time to address it, don't need to address it. We just line up and go practice and prep for Saturday.

You know, I think when you handle it that way and you don't make a big deal out of it, it becomes not a big deal, and that's not to downplay the impact that those guys have had on this program over the last two years. We certainly all know that. But we also have a game to win, and we have guys that are going to suit up, and so we're going to move forward with them.

Q. Along those lines, how has Sam Howell responded to this? I know four starters but also four leaders on this team. How does he kind of try to get the distractions -- no distractions in practice and keep everyone focused on the game?

PHIL LONGO: So I often think coaches are guilty of making this game a lot more difficult than it has to be. I think we could very easily have made a big deal out of a little adversity and made a problem out of nothing.

I think the only coaching that I gave Sam that he probably didn't even need, because he's mature enough to understand this now leading the offense for the last 24 games, but the only advice I gave him and the only coaching I told him was not to feel like he has to go and win this game himself.

The best thing he can do for our football team right now is to keep doing what he has been doing: Manage the offense, make plays when he has the opportunity to make plays, and not go outside the -- the only time he's ever gotten in trouble at all, and it's been very few, is when he's tried to do more than he really needs to do on a play, and I think he'd tell you the same thing.

He hasn't done that in quite a while, and so that's really the only advice I gave him was look, we need to stay focused and keep doing what we're doing, and he just gave me the nod that he always gave me and we go out and practiced as we always do. So it's business as usual right now offensively.

Q. I was just curious if you draw on any of your

experience when you face Texas A&M from your time at Ole Miss that you can now apply to your meeting in the Orange Bowl?

PHIL LONGO: Yeah, I think anything we did wrong then we're just not going to do now. Joking aside, this is a completely different team. It's the same offensive system, but we have different players here. There's a different emphasis. We are emphasizing different things in the offense. Some of them are similar, and many of them are different.

It's just like anything else. We have a different cast going into this Saturday than we've had all season, so we're going to play to the strengths of that cast. The cast I had at Ole Miss was different than here, so I went back just to see what Elko did against this X's and O's system, but I think he's going to spend a lot more time watching and studying and preparing for what we're doing here at North Carolina. And that's really the mindset that we have on our end, as well.

Q. Phil, you guys always seem to be in sync through the season on that opening drive. I think it finished with eight touchdowns -- I forgot. It was so many. But you guys are always in sync on that first drive. With having to plug in so many new guys for the starters, in some way are you going to be kind of feeling out to get your own chemistry with so many new guys that are going to be plugged in now as starters?

PHIL LONGO: Truthfully I'm really not. I think if I did that, I would be making a mistake on my own part. I think that our offense is the offense. The guys are -- we still have eight of them, and then the five that we rotate in and out at those other positions that are really good football players and have contributed to all the success that the three that won't be here have had.

Do we expect the guys that we're plugging in to be Javonte and Michael and Dyami? No, we don't. So the only difference will be is we may distribute the ball to more players because we need to. I don't know if there's a guy on the roster that can tote the ball 30 times the way Javonte could right now with the way he's playing, and so you're going to see more names and more faces have a role on Saturday.

But in terms of what I'm calling and how I call it and when I call it, I don't know that any of that's going to change. To me that's going away from what we do well.

Q. And you mentioned talking to Sam about basically playing within himself. Did you have the same conversation with Dazz, given that he's been

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somebody who's provided a lot of big plays over the last couple of seasons, about him also not trying to do too much?

PHIL LONGO: No, I haven't had that conversation with Dazz. As a matter of fact I hope Dazz tries to score on every single play he touches the football. If he wants to take the team on his back and catch the ball for 200 yards and three touchdowns, be my guest. We could use as good a game out of Dazz as we could get, and that really holds true for all our guys. Go out and do their job and give us your best effort, and if they're looking to overlap some of the production that we have lost, fantastic.

The guy that's running the show, the one that's making the mental decisions, I want and we need him to be as focused as he has been, and to generate and execute the offense the way he has and let the athletes go make plays.

Q. Who are you kind of looking to replace what Dyami could do as a deep threat, as the big wide receiver that can go long --

PHIL LONGO: Well, there's three receivers that we're very high on, Khafre Brown has made some big plays this year, and Emery Simmons, his role has increased every week as the season has gone on and he's made some huge plays, especially in the second half of the season. And then we're going to lean on Antoine Green somewhat in the game, as well. So those three, and you may see some of Justin Olson. Those three or four guys are going to be our wide receiver corps.

And in the backfield you're going to see Elijah, you're going to see Josh Henderson, you're going to see British Brooks. That's who's here. Those are the guys who know the job. That's who we have confidence in, so those will be the names you're calling out on Saturday as opposed to some of the others.

Q. How does having a deep threat like Dyami, who can really take a top off a defense, help the overall offense?

PHIL LONGO: Well, I think the goal is stretch the defense horizontally pre-snap, stretch them vertically post snap and in a perfect world you'd like to get all 11 guys evenly displaced away from each other, so you're creating space for your athletes. It doesn't work that pretty, but when you have a guy like Dyami who can stretch you vertically, it gives us an opportunity to do that to the defense. He's always a huge threat down the field.

But as I say, Dazz is a huge threat down the field. Emery is a threat down the field, Antoine is, Khafre certainly is.

So we're going to have to do some of the things that we are used to doing with some different faces, and the rest of it will still be instinctive to the remaining players on the offense.

Q. Touching on what you were talking about, about Sam and staying focused and playing within himself, is there any inclination just on your part when you're scripting these plays or just putting your plan in place to give him more responsibility just because you know what you have in him? Just on your end, when you're getting your designs together, do you have that inclination just to put even more on his plate?

PHIL LONGO: So I would say, and I always say that our offense is simpler because we want the guys to play instinctively, and that sounds like rhetoric but that's really how it is. Wherever that level of responsibility from a decision-making standpoint is with Sam, will he have more to do this game? A little bit.

Again, why dish up something completely different to a player who's already one of the best at his position? We're going to ask him to do what he's always done, and maybe he'll have a few more decisions to make with regards to -- it's a good thing he has more people to distribute the ball to. When Dyami is out there and you have a one-on-one, you kind of know where you're going. Now he's going to have to settle in and pick the one that is in the best one-on-one scenario and trigger the football, whether it be on a screen or underneath or downtown. His job doesn't change. It's just the cast that he's playing with will be a little bit different.

Their strengths are a little bit different, so we'll play to their strengths. If we have a really good change-of-direction underneath guy, we may do a little bit more there with him. If we have another guy that can go downtown, then we'll try to go downtown with that guy. We were so spoiled with Javonte and Michael because both of them were so well-rounded, and we have some well-rounded backs that are going to play Saturday, but some of them are blocking better, some of them are running better, some of them are better receivers. We're going to utilize most of them and we're going to play to their strengths, and I think we can get through a game that way without creating any tendencies because you don't have game 14 to go to.

Q. Do you think you guys are even learning stuff about some of the running backs that haven't played as much and the receivers that have played much, even now at the end of December with -- just right now in practice you're learning more about what they can do?

PHIL LONGO: I think you're always learning. What I learned today was there were some guys out there that took a lot more reps than they usually get, and they handled it really well. So that was kind of promising today.

But as I've said, the white team that goes in after the blue team gets the exact same amount of reps in practice all week long, and that includes Friday.

So those guys have had as much time to prepare for what they do their skill set at their position as the guys that were playing ahead of them.

I think from a knowing the offense and making this cut and that catch and this block and doing all those things, those are things that they know how to do already, and we just have to -- they have to understand they've got to go execute and do those things against live competition on Saturday.

Q. I know Jimbo Fisher's MO per se is to keep the momentum going. Does your locker room message parallel that in any way, and if not what's a view into your meeting mantras?

PHIL LONGO: Keep the momentum going is what you're saying they're doing at A&M? Well, I hope we're doing the same thing. We just discussed scoring. I guess we scored a touchdown on the first drive of eight games. We'd like to keep that going. We'd like that to be game 9 this Saturday.

The momentum and really we want to stay consistent, and we want to continue to do what we have done all year, and that's try to be a week better for the next opponent. We respect A&M tremendously. They have one of the best defensive lines that we've seen all season, maybe in the two years I've been here. They're really, really good on the back end. The linebackers are excellent football players.

We're going to see one of the better defenses we've seen. We know that. We know where the individual challenges are. We know we're going to have to play physically. We know this will be one of the faster defenses we've competed against.

Look, we know our job. We're well aware of what we need to do to win the game, and it's just going to come down to executing on Saturday to give ourselves an opportunity to win on the offensive side.

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